

Amoglas Dispatch

College students come face to face with politics

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Cochise College students who recently traveled to the Arizona State Capitol to meet state representatives, Secretary of State Ken Bennett and Governor Jan Brewer got an eye-opening look at politics beyond the classroom.

The 20 students who made the trip are enrolled in a political science course led by instructors Dave Pettes, Charlie Austin, and Amber Ybarra, the team's newest member and a former Cochise College student. The trip offered a focused, inside look at real-world politics and connected directly to the students' classroom learning experiences. The essence of the trip was for students to be able to critically think about topics that are addressed in class and to become involved beyond academics, Ybarra said.

Student preparation for experiences like these begins from day one of the semester. Students engage in research about political issues and in numerous class discussions, including opportunities to have guest speakers.

"This trip," affirms Ybarra, "is all about making connections with what has been talked about in the classroom and what discussions will arise afterwards."

The trip began early the morning of February 16. The bus left the Douglas Campus at 5:30 a.m. and arrived at the Arizona State Capitol Complex in Phoenix just in time for students to attend the Majority (House/Senate Republicans) or the Minority (House/Senate Democrats) Caucus, or both.

"Students attending meetings of party members realize that this is where actual decisions are made, not on the floor," Ybarra said.

Senator Manuel "Manny" Alvarez welcomed the group in the Senate, and Patricia Fleming, representing District 25, introduced the group in the Arizona House of Representatives. Jessica Romo, one of the participating students, said the experience inspired her to keep working hard in school and be active in the community "so that one day I can be on the floor voting on bills."

Arturo Felix, a lawyer in Agua Prieta, Sonora, and a political science student at Cochise College, attended so that he could compare the American and Mexican political systems.

"I am finding a lot of similarities except for the fact that here in the United States, representatives hold a public meeting prior to each of their House and Senate committee meetings and let people know how they intend to vote," Felix said. "It is not this way in Mexico."

The day kept getting better for the students, who had a meeting with Governor Jan Brewer. The governor tackled tough questions from the students, who wanted to know about possible initiatives between Sonora and Arizona to keep border towns peaceful and safe. Brewer said she will serve on a Sonoran council of governors to discuss homeland security issues.

The students also attended meetings with Secretary of State Ken Bennett and Kyrsten Sinema, assistant leader to the Democratic Caucus in the House of Representatives.

“Seeing the students blossom in such a short time was heartwarming,” Ybarra said. “In the morning they were timid and hesitant to ask questions. By mid-afternoon, the politicians were limiting their questions because they had so many! I hope this trip inspires them to use their voice, ideas and values in years ahead.”

Student Sarah Lewis came away with a renewed faith in the political system and appreciated having a face to put with the names constituents see in the media.

“Although I personally do not share the same views and philosophy of some of the people we met today, I now believe that they are all dedicated public servants who are doing their best to represent the citizens of our state,” Lewis said.

The return trip was not quiet. Students still had much to say about politics.

“I think everyone should experience this at least once in a lifetime,” said Diana Duarte. “More people need to get involved. We need to start looking more into ‘who’ is running Arizona and ‘how’ they are running it.”